

Washington State Rail Plan

Regional Rail Workshop

May 30, 2013
Blaine, Washington

Hosted by:



Report Date: August 19, 2013

For more information:

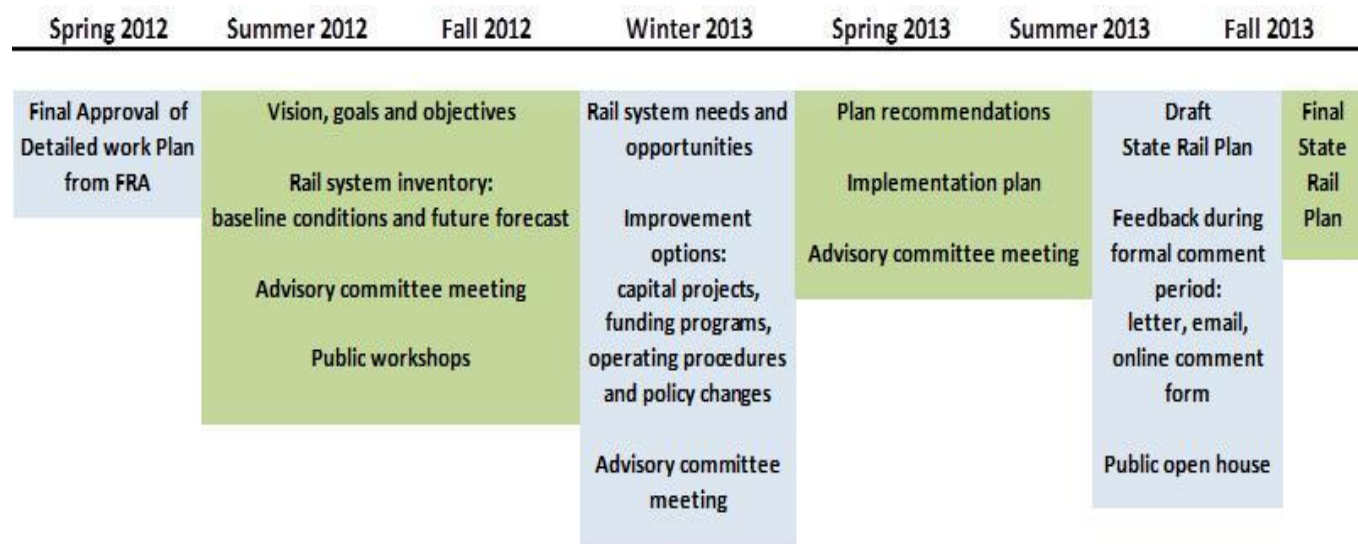
- Visit www.wsdot.wa.gov/rail
- Email comments to rail@wsdot.wa.gov
- Call the WSDOT Rail Division at 360.705.7900
- Write to the WSDOT Rail Division at P.O. Box 47407, Olympia, WA 98504-7407
- Fax comments to 360.705.6821

Regional Rail Workshop for the Washington State Rail Plan

The city of Blaine and the Whatcom Council of Governments (WCOG), in partnership with WSDOT, hosted a regional rail workshop in Blaine to help develop the next [State Rail Plan](#). Workshop participants learned about the rail plan process and shared their views about priority needs and opportunities for the state rail system.

State rail plan overview

The Washington State Rail Plan will serve as a strategic blueprint for future public investment in the state's rail transportation system. It will provide an integrated plan for freight and passenger rail, including 5- and 20-year funding strategies, that meets federal and state requirements. The plan will inform the [State Freight Mobility Plan](#); guide WSDOT as it develops strategic freight rail partnerships to support essential rail service; and establish priorities for determining which freight rail investments should receive public support. It will also guide Washington as it works with Oregon and British Columbia to determine next steps for intercity passenger rail service. WSDOT will release the final State Rail Plan by the end of 2013. Following completion of the State Rail Plan, the plan results will be incorporated into the State Freight Mobility Plan, the Washington Transportation Plan and the Federal Railroad Administration's National Rail Plan.



Workshop format

The goal of the workshop was to introduce the State Rail Plan; describe the timeline and highlight opportunities for public involvement; share information about the state's rail transportation system; and discuss the Amtrak Cascades New Stop Evaluation for Auburn.

The workshop was held on May 30 in Blaine with 72 participants representing 44 different groups, including short-line railroads, ports, cities, and other advocacy groups.

Agenda

- WCOG opened the meeting and welcomed participants. City of Blaine and WSDOT also provided introductory remarks.
- After the welcome and introduction of participants, there was a discussion of the State Rail Plan, overview of rail system and rail system needs, and an opportunity to ask questions.
- Then WSDOT presented information regarding the New Stop Evaluation Study and gave participants an opportunity to ask more questions.
- This was followed by small group discussion of local and regional perspectives on state rail system needs. Participants were asked to share their thoughts about rail transportation in the region.
- An opportunity was provided for participants to have an open discussion and ask any further questions.
- WSDOT described next steps were presented in the planning process.
- WCOG, WSDOT and City of Blaine ended the meeting with reflections and closing remarks.



Washington State Rail Plan information

WSDOT provided an overview of the State Rail Plan and described key findings. The presentation also included discussion about WSDOT's efforts to develop criteria that will guide future evaluation of potential new stops for Amtrak Cascades. Highlights from the presentation are provided below.

State Transportation Planning Goals

State Transportation Planning Goals set the direction for what we want to achieve and help us identify and prioritize needs.

- **Economic Vitality:** To promote and develop transportation systems that stimulate, support, and enhance the movement of people and goods to ensure a prosperous economy.
- **Preservation:** To maintain, preserve, and extend the life and utility of prior investments in transportation systems and services.
- **Safety:** To provide for and improve the safety and security of transportation customers and the transportation system.
- **Mobility:** To improve the predictable movement of goods and people throughout Washington State.
- **Environment:** To enhance Washington's quality of life through transportation investments that promote energy conservation, enhance healthy communities, and protect the environment.
- **Stewardship:** To continuously improve the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of the transportation system.

Washington's Rail System

Strengths

- Providing good mobility for existing train volumes.
- Extensive network connects citizens and industry.
- Supports industries that contribute \$106 billion to GDP and support 1.2 million jobs.
- Most fuel-efficient mode and produces the least amount of carbon.

Challenges

- Bottlenecks, constraints and access issues on Class I system.
- Delays and reliability concerns.
- Deferred maintenance degrading level of service on short-line railroads.

- Access to national and global markets.
- Meeting future demand.
- Maintaining a safe rail system.

Rail System Needs and Opportunities

Rail Operations and Infrastructure Needs

- Address capacity constraints in order to meet future passenger and freight rail demands.
- Preserve existing rail capacity and infrastructure.
- Enhance the efficiency and reliability of existing rail services.

Rail's Role in Economic Development

- Support economic development by providing access to people and industry.
- Preserve access to global markets by ensuring access to Washington's ports.

Rail System Priorities and Goals

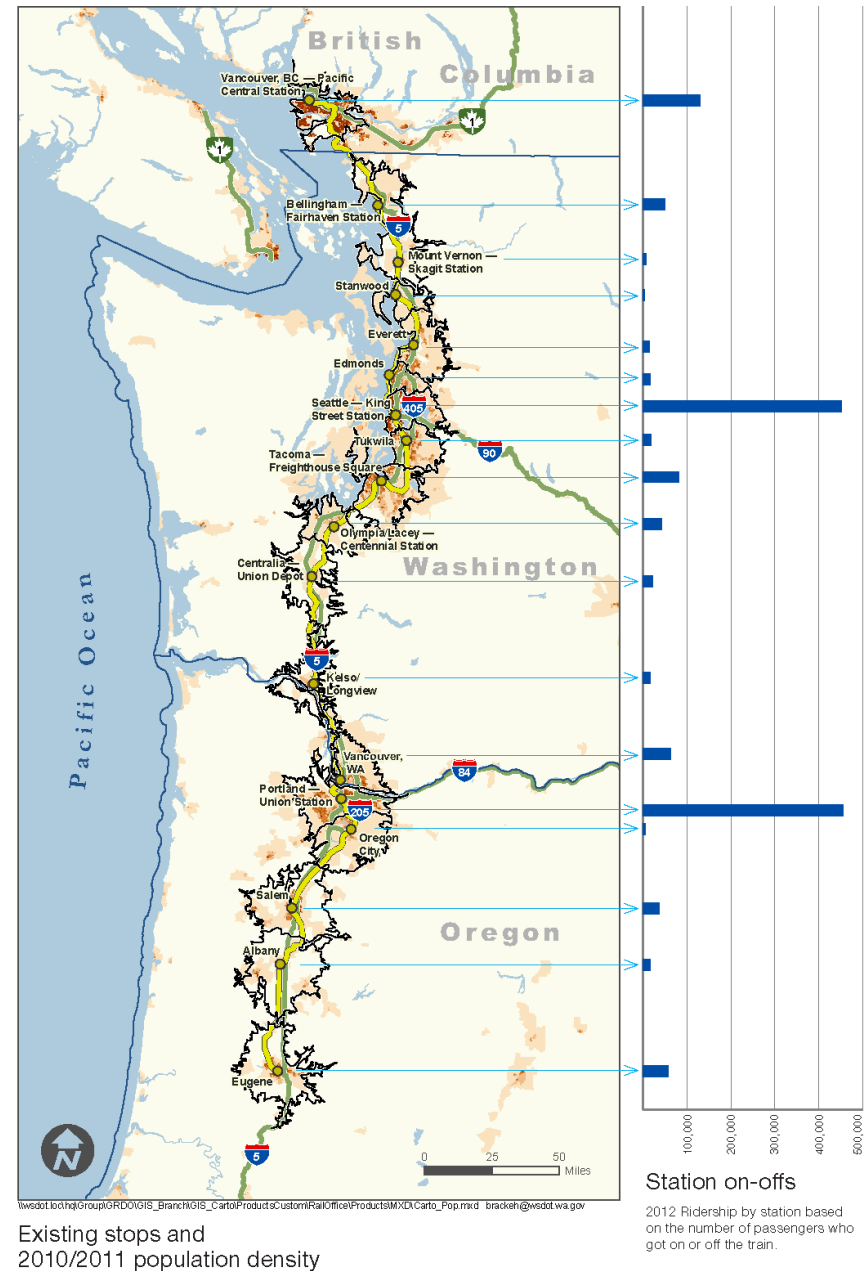
- Prioritize cost-effective investments into the state's rail system.
- Strengthen rail as an environmentally and community friendly mode of transportation.
- Continue to support safe and secure passenger and freight rail movement.

New Stop Evaluation Study

The Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) to study the feasibility of an Amtrak Cascades stop at Auburn, and to conduct a market analysis of adding or changing stops on the route. This opportunity comes at a challenging time for the program: while we are implementing \$800 million in capital projects that will greatly improve the service, we are also facing increasing operating costs that will strain our budget. It is against this backdrop that the New Stop Evaluation – Auburn study provides an analysis of a potential Auburn stop based on benefits and disadvantages for the service, corridor wide. Establishing a transparent, fair process for evaluating new stop proposals is an important part of implementing state transportation policy guidance for the benefit of the Amtrak Cascades service, interested communities and Washington taxpayers.

Proposed Evaluation Criteria

Operational Feasibility	Assess the effect of the stop on travel time and reliability.
Customer Demand	Assess potential market demand for the stop.
Station Suitability	Assess the strengths and challenges of a station or location as an Amtrak Cascades stop.
Interconnectivity Benefits	Assess the benefits of a stop compared to baseline conditions.
Fiscal Viability	Based on anticipated costs and revenues, is the effect of the new station positive, neutral or negative?



What we heard

Workshop participants shared their perspectives on rail transportation during small group discussion. A summary of their comments is provided below.

New Amtrak Cascades Stop at Blaine

- Consider population north of the border to evaluate the feasibility of a train stop at Blaine.
- Compare feasibility and implementation of a stop at Blaine to Stanwood Station.
- Consider implementing a variable stop schedule.
- Study should include travel time savings for Lower Mainland customers.
- Determine population density south of the Fraser River.
- Look at bi-national impact.
- Work on cross-border proposal.
- Include biometric screening in the border crossing passenger screening system.
- Restore Blaine's train depot.
- White Rock supports Blaine stop.
- Connectivity benefits:
 - North Whatcom County
 - Lower Mainland, British Columbia
 - Potential for future direct line into Bellingham airport
- Through-trains don't produce community benefits, but trains that stop could produce benefits for Blaine.
- Blaine depot needs public/private partnership.
- Don't close Pacific Central Station in Vancouver, B.C.
- There is a huge market for Amtrak Cascades in the Lower Mainland.
- Use the European security model at the border crossing.
- What is the effect of fuel prices on rail ridership?
- How do we continue the process of analyzing Blaine without funding?
- Need an implementation "Action Plan."
- Blaine community members interested in adding a stop on Amtrak Cascades should contact other successful stops.
- Is B.C. willing to help fund a stop in Blaine?



- Petition gatherers talked with many people who say they don't currently ride the train, but would cross the border from Canada and ride Amtrak Cascades from Blaine.
- Consider charging for parking to generate revenue.
- Isn't there a similar story with the growth in Bellingham Airport that could be applied to a Blaine stop?
- There is a difference between commuter rail and intercity rail.

At-Grade Crossings

- Longer and larger trains will require improvements to rail crossings.
- Need to protect existing infrastructure and anticipated increases in vehicular traffic.
- Huge traffic impacts at Cherry Point likely to result from new bulk terminal.
- It appears that freight is overtaking all existing capacity of rail line.
- All grade crossings block the roads.
- Growing volume of trains.
- Funding for overpasses is needed.
- How are improvements prioritized?
- How are Washington and B.C. working together?

Congestion – VACIS (Vehicle and Cargo Inspection System)¹ Impacts

- Backups are typically:
 - 15-20 minutes plus
 - Additional 10-15 minutes for traffic queue to clear
- Move VACIS now!
- VACIS inspection is at Bell Road. It causes delays in traffic on the highway. This causes many serious impacts. For example, children miss school-provided breakfast due to delay and emergency vehicles are affected.



¹ VACIS is an x-ray system using gamma ray imaging to verify the contents inside the package or container without breaking the seal. A VACIS facility is currently located near Blaine.

- There is concern that improvements could be made to the rail system without input from local government and citizens (e.g., VACIS installation).

Safety

- How do we provide emergency access during Vehicle and Cargo Inspection System (VACIS) delay?
- How do we implement emergency air service during train (VACIS) backups?
- Provide education component for emergency options during VACIS backups.
- Research directional wayside horns at crossings.
- Determine usage/time impacts based on forecasted rail and vehicular traffic.

Freight and Passenger Impact

- Economic impact of rail in Blaine. Today, the city experiences impact but not benefit. Adding the station could result in possible increase in jobs in industries that use rail.
- Does the plan prioritize between freight and passenger?
- Increasing on-time performance (OTP) on the Amtrak Cascades would be beneficial to Vancouver, B.C. and all other stakeholders:
 - Ridership increases as a result of better OTP.
 - Challenges:
 - Lack of dedicated track for passengers
 - Geographical constraints:
 - Slope stability
 - Space for additional track
 - Need to have MOU with local transit during slides



Freight Rail in Whatcom County

- Increasing freight rail (coal/oil).
- At what point should Washington and British Columbia engage in new freight/passenger high-speed line?
- Who should be paying for upgrades?

Preclearance

Pre-clearance means clearance is at point of departure. Implementation of preclearance at Pacific Central Station in Vancouver, B.C. would eliminate the need for an inspection stop at the border, reducing corridor travel time by 10 minutes or more.

- Inter-border agreements in process.
- Admissibility – Immigration done in Vancouver, B.C.
- Customs – done at point of entry.
- It needs to be more seamless.

Roles and Responsibilities for Capital Investment

- Better involvement with local communities. Local communities might have to assist with funding or submit proposal.
- Scheduling of passenger rail needs to meet work schedules and airport timing at Sea-Tac. This is limited at this time with the current schedule. It's hard for passengers to make their connections.
- We need real “high-speed rail.”

Open Discussion

We thanked participants for following our agenda and invited them to share any comments — “What do you want to tell us?”

- Mr. Bill Becht provided WSDOT with copies of petition signatures gathered by the Save Blaine Station group. There were more than 5,000 signatures under the heading, “Support for Blaine Station remodel and Amtrak Service.”
- WSDOT needs to recognize that a trip from the Lower Mainland, B.C., is inefficient — customers must travel northwest to station and then back down to the border.
- To make a Blaine stop work, travel times need to improve from Bellingham to Vancouver, B.C.



- A more direct route and real high speeds (250 mph) for Amtrak Cascades will draw more ridership for the service.
- If you are going to improve service to have an attractive passenger service, an alternative line (freight/passenger) is needed.
- Several participants believe that if a study is done by Blaine for Blaine, it won't go anywhere. Others shared their perspective that "we" (Blaine stop proponents) need to bring WSDOT a proposal that will work.

Next steps

The next steps for the Washington State Rail Plan include:

- Identify and evaluate responses to needs: capital projects, operational improvements, and program and policy changes.
- Recommend priority actions to achieve vision and goals; create an implementation plan.
- Release draft Washington State Rail Plan for public review and comment in September 2013.
- Finalize Washington State Rail Plan in December 2013.

There was also discussion about possible next steps for those interested in adding a stop at Blaine to the Amtrak Cascades schedule. WSDOT explained that the agency does not have funding to conduct an evaluation at this time. The draft Auburn report will be released at the end of June, and WSDOT plans to initiate an interim policy on new stops at that time. We will begin a public process to solicit input on New Stop Evaluation Criteria and formalize a policy in late 2014.

Workshop participants

All Aboard Washington
Blaine Chamber of Commerce
Blossom Management
BNSF Railway
BP
Canada Border Services Agency
Canadian Consulate
Cardno ENTRIX
Cascadia Center
Circle of Trees Homestead
Citizens
City of Bellingham
City of Birch Bay
City of Blaine
City of Ferndale
City of Lynden
City of Surrey
City of White Rock
Community Transportation Advisory Group of Whatcom Council of Governments
Consulate General of Canada
Corporation of Delta
Cottage by the Bay

Customs and Border Protection
Horseshoe Coins and Antiques
International Longshore and Warehouse Union
National Association of Railroad Passengers
National Railway Equipment Company
Nooksack Indian Tribe
Northern Lights
Oregon Department of Transportation
Pacific Coast Pensioners Association
Pacific Corridor Enterprise Council, BC Chamber of Commerce
Port of Bellingham
SmartRail
South Fork Valley Community Association
South Surrey White Rock Chamber of Commerce
Transport Canada
Tribal Transportation Planning Organization
Veterans of Foreign Wars
Washington Indian Transportation Policy Advisory Committee
Washington State Department of Commerce
Washington State Department of Transportation
Washington State Public Works Board
Whatcom Council of Governments

Workshop project team

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